

Ian McBryde is a Canadian-born poet who has lived and worked in Australia for many years. His poetry has appeared in various journals both locally and overseas, and his work has been translated into several languages. He has performed his poetry in England, Canada and the USA, as well as along the East Coast of Australia. Ian recently launched his forth collection of poetry entitled *Equatorial*, and is about to release a spoken word CD recorded with Melbourne musician Greg Riddell, entitled *The Still Company*.

I'm sitting outside the Fitzroy Gardens teahouse waiting for my subject to arrive when a wiry red-headed figure bounds toward me, sweat dripping down his forehead having endured a manic across-town dash on foot in order to reach our meeting. With intensity, passion and concentration that are the hallmarks of his poetry, Ian McBryde straightens his composure and begins to speak about his cherished craft: poetry.

Born in Toronto - having lived in Australia for some twenty-nine years - McBryde is undoubtedly a multi-talented creative force; a writer and artist with many facets to his creative abilities. A musician (drummer) for many years, as well as highly proficient sketch artist, poetry has provided the "one constant" McBryde has always returned to. Indeed, as a musician it was the constant frustration of having bands break up that ultimately lead him towards pouring his undivided energies into an art form that "...nobody else could disassemble."

Although music and drawing remain lingering passions in Ian's life, poetry, performance and the recording of his work have become the driving force behind McBryde's creative output in recent years.

A competent and riveting performer of his work, McBryde nevertheless sees the performance of his poetry as incidental to his writing, as he emphatically suggests: "I never write for performance - I write for the page not the stage."

While McBryde has published four solid collections of poetry, *Equatorial* - his most recent collection launched last month at Melbourne's La Mama Theatre by respected poet Alex Skovon - remains his strongest according to his own, as well as Skovron's assessment. As McBryde reflects, the process of publishing invariably leads an author to become somewhat more self-critical and inwardly focused as the search for development and perfection continues, "As one gets more books published it becomes even more crucial what gets in there" he muses, while at the same time he urges authors to sustain confidence in their work, "You need to have confidence about what goes in the book."

Although *Equatorial* is a work composed of many disparate parts, it is the bi-polar motivations of "profound joy and profound despair" that generally inform McBryde's work. His poems are not only rigorous in their construction, but direct, immediate and often 'startling' in their ruminations. No doubt McBryde is also known for his edgy, sometimes

dark insights into the human condition. Writing on McBryde's third collection, Flank, fellow poet Dorothy Porter suggests that McBryde's work "...is sharp with succinct but also darkly insidious poetry..."

Indeed, McBryde is craftsman-like in his meticulous working and re-working of his poems, often calling for many handwritten drafts to be undertaken before moving to the keyboard to put something on the screen. As McBryde relates, "it would be quite normal for me to have handwritten fifteen versions of the poem before I sit down to type it up." Curiously, McBryde feels that finishing a poem as final draft on computer is a little "like putting clothes on...putting a tie on and straightening it up."

While editing and the exacting process of the reworking of his poems are his stock in trade, McBryde feels that his experience and maturity as a poet have lead him to a state of greater confidence about the editing process. "Increasingly - to my delight - I find that I can edit any time, but I can't always go to the special country where the poem is born every time [to re-write]." Accordingly, the maturity that comes from having a number of published collections under his belt has also lead to a sense of heightened awareness as a poet. As McBryde reflects, "I think my focus is [getting] sharper all the time..."

Another aspect of McBryde's evolution as a poet has been a conscious awareness that lead him to focus intently on quality rather than quantity in his work. While in his early years as a poet he focused solidly on productivity and attempts to send out a certain number of poems each year, his later work has focused on crafting a smaller number of poems with more intense effort put into their evolution. As he reflects, "I'm trying to write not so many poems but pour the focus and the energy and determination into those ones as opposed to writing a whole lot and hoping that some might be suitable."

While he is meticulous in his crafting, his formative approach in drafting his poems reflects a somewhat more anarchic method, as McBryde himself humorously laments: "I'm a believer in being festooned with thousands of little pieces of paper, it's ridiculous. I'm forever pulling little bits of paper out of my pocket. I've got a sentence here or a line there. I should be better organized and put it all down in a little book that I carry around..."

So what is McBryde's philosophy with regard to the production of poetry? "Good poetry should be succinct, it should be honed to a razor sharp edge. It should avoid the superfluous use of words. You couldn't say it better than Raymond Carver: 'Get in, get out and don't linger.' You couldn't say it any better than that..."

But clarity and succinctness come at a price and a writer must pay for this in long and dedicated hours put aside to feed ones craft; and undoubtedly such dedication is uppermost amongst McBryde's formula. Like many poets, McBryde has a full time job in order to support himself while he pursues his passion for writing poetry, often late into the night: "I steal from nature in order to write. I work late at night and I know that I have to get up at seven the next morning. If that's when the call comes then that's when I have to answer." Perhaps also this passion can be powerfully summed up in McBryde's emphatic statement, "I write because I would explode if I didn't."

So what advice does McBryde have to offer writers starting out in the field of poetry? “Any incipient writer should read everything, read everything. Read stuff you don’t like and work out why you don’t like it. Work out what fills you with fire and delight and try and work out why. I think if someone has a love of literature and a strong heart, the more you work at it the less sort of gates there are in front of you.” And never be put off by rejections, “you cannot take it personally...be thoroughly relentless and maybe remember what Lola Montez once said: ‘Courage and shuffle the cards’.”

On that note, perhaps a fitting final line from ‘Testament’ one of McBryde’s *Equatorial* poems: “I must go now, I’ve probably/said too much already.”

Interview and Story by Marcus Niski. Copyright 2001

This interview originally appeared in *The Australian Writer* # 329